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SUBJECT: CODEL MCCAIN MEETS WITH GOI OFFICIALS

Classified By: Ryan Crocker for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: In an April 1 dinner hosted by the Ambassador, members of Codel McCain (Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), Rep. Mike Pence (R-IN) and Rep. Rick Renzi (R-AZ)) met with Iraqi VP Hashemi, DPM Saleh, FM Zebari, DefMin al-Mufriji, and National Security Advisor Rubaie. Codel members reiterated support for Iraq's democracy but cautioned that the U.S. public is impatient for political progress in Iraq. The Iraqi officials warned against premature withdrawal of U.S. troops. End Summary.

CODEL Urges Quick GOI Political Progress

12. (C) Senator McCain said Iraq was not the only reason for Republicans' defeat in November Congressional elections; spending and corruption contributed as well. However, U.S. domestic frustration and sorrow over the Iraqi war is real. President Bush is determined to veto Congressional budget bills containing withdrawal timelines, but McCain said it is difficult to predict what would happen thereafter. McCain said he believes that this might be the high-water mark of opposition to the Iraq war. General Petraeus's success is having a small effect but media are not reporting it, focusing instead on continuing violence. There is a window of opportunity, McCain concluded, but not for very long. He hoped that the GOI would move quickly on legislation on hydrocarbons, provincial elections, and de-Baathification reform so that defenders of U.S. Iraq policy could point to political as well as military progress. While Americans are frustrated about Iraq, most recognize the danger of withdrawal and still hope for success.

13. (C) Representative Pence agreed with Senator McCain. Military progress must be accompanied by political progress in order to avoid withdrawal of U.S. troops. Representative Renzi urged the Iraqi officials to take action that would give hope of political progress.

14. (C) Senator Graham said that many Americans view Iraq as being unable to resolve domestic quarrels and unable to govern itself. Unless this perception changes soon, there would be a Congressional mandate to withdraw troops. U.S. defenders of President Bush's Iraqi policy need something to show the American people on issues like oil revenues and taming the Sunni insurgency. Graham asked the Iraqi officials what help they need to make this type of progress.

Blunt Words from Sunni VP Hashemi

15. (C) Sunni VP Hashemi stated bluntly that the U.S. had made mistakes in Iraq, and it is unfair for the U.S. to now use its own mistakes as a reason to withdraw troops. Hashemi recounted that he thought he had persuaded the President and

key Democratic senators of that during his December trip to the U.S. Hashemi warned that Iraq's problems would not be resolved quickly, certainly not by summer 2007. Hashemi blamed the U.S. for creating an opportunity for AQI to come into Iraq. "Forgive me," he said, "but you encouraged them to come. And now you'll leave us to tackle this problem alone." He urged the USG to keep its commitment to Iraqis. A U.S. troop pullout would mean "chaos and war."

¶6. (C) Hashemi also urged the Codel not to focus on U.S. public opinion. Hydrocarbons legislation, de-Baathification reform and provincial elections were "for your country," but the real urgent issues facing Iraq are reconciliation, power sharing and reform of Iraqi security forces (ISF). Hashemi said he needs to address his Sunni constituency on these issues, "but I have zero to show them."

Al-Qaeda in Iraq

¶7. (C) Senator Graham noted that he had observed Khalid Sheikh Muhammed's (KSM's) hearing at Guantanamo base. He described KSM as "chilling," intelligent and even philosophical. Sunni VP Hashemi urged the group to focus on the reasons for the appeal of a figure like KSM. Hashemi said that al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) is wrestling control of Sunni areas of Baghdad from more moderate forces. The answer is to deprive AQI of the reasons for its appeal.

¶8. (C) Hashemi characterized AQI as "imported," not genuinely Iraqi. However, AQI is making political headway by arguing that Iraq's Sunnis have gained nothing through the political process and violence the only avenue for advancing

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Sunni political interests.

National Security Advisor Urges "Strategic Patience"

¶9. (C) National Security Advisor Rubaie called Iraq's democracy a "paradigm shift" for the region that requires "strategic patience." Such a shift "does not fit with Washington's election cycle." The BSP is making good progress because it is an integrated plan with an Iraqi buy-in. Rubaie claimed many internally displaced persons (IDPs) had returned to Baghdad and many neighborhoods have been cleared. AQI would not be defeated this year or next, but Iraq is the forefront of the war on terror. Political progress has been painfully slow, he conceded, but some important steps have already been taken.

FM: Withdrawal Would Be "Devastating"

¶10. (C) FM Zebari underlined that GOI officials have a sense of urgency about the need for political progress. Zebari said the GOI is committed to the Baghdad Security Plan's (BSP's) success but realize this will take time. The GOI must launch a parallel political initiative, including hydrocarbons legislation, de-Baathification reform, provincial elections and constitutional review.

¶11. (C) Zebari recounted he had discussed these measures with Arab leaders at the recent Arab League Summit, reminding them that these political measures are the GOI's agenda and did not need to be forced on it from outside. The GOI had taken the lead in organizing the March 10 Baghdad Neighbor's Conference. Zebari asked for U.S. help in persuading Arab neighbors to accept the GOI's legitimacy.

¶12. (C) Zebari said a premature U.S. troop pullout would be "devastating." U.S. troops are a key deterrent to sectarian

violence. Zebari said he believes that the UNSCR mechanism provides the best inherent framework in which to consider such timetables.

DPM Saleh: Abandoning the Project Not an Option

¶13. (C) DPM Saleh called U.S. partnership with Iraq crucial; "abandoning the project is not an option." Saleh said Iraqi public opinion had shifted in recent weeks and Iraqis no longer view U.S. troops as occupiers, but rather, as "honest brokers."

¶14. (C) Saleh recognized that security gains could easily be reversed. Iraq needs a grand political bargain, including the legislative elements the group had discussed. Saleh saw reasons for cautious optimism in security progress in Baghdad and Anbar. Saleh told the group it is unfair to blame the GOI alone for the slowness of political progress; larger regional disputes are being played out on Iraqi soil. These issues will not be resolved this year, but Saleh agreed with the importance of showing that trends are going in the right direction. "We get your message," Saleh concluded.

¶15. (C) DefMin al-Mufriji echoed Rubaie's call for patience. He said the most important work is to increase public confidence in the ISF, and this is starting to increase.

¶16. (U) Codel McCain did not have an opportunity to clear this cable.
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